**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

**ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)**

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**The Path of the Piaseczner Rebbe**

**By Dr. Ron Wacks**

**Shiur #19: Chassidic Service of God**

**Fervor and Emotion**

The crisis in which the Jewish community in general, and the Chassidic movement in particular, was mired, has been described at length in our preceding discussions. R. Kalonymus’s pain over the alienation from Torah and observance of the commandments, desecration of Shabbat in public, and rebellion against parents and teachers is clear from his writings. One of the reasons that he offers for these phenomena is exposure to leisure culture and undesirable passion:

[The child] feels autonomous and independent concerning what excites and what moves him, and since these feelings have emerged before he was ready for them, he is moved and excited by the illusory beauty of all the foolish things the world is full of, such as the theaters and all the folly and the licentiousness that can be found in the world.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The youth seem to be moved more by theater than by study of Torah. Therefore, educators must supply the solution to the problem before it arises by teaching them to arouse within their own hearts a fervor and excitement relating to matters of holiness and by embarking on education towards fervor and holy passion at a young age:

If we do not first begin to arouse his soul so that it will be moved and affected by every *mitzva*, by the Torah, and the by light of God, we will not accomplish anything, God forbid. For even if the child understands intellectually that he is responsible for his own education, his feelings and desires will steer him off the good path…[[2]](#footnote-2)

Attention should be paid to the fact that R. Kalonymus draws a distinction between intellectual knowledge and subjective feeling. Perhaps the child understands intellectually that the way of Torah is right and good, but his psyche arouses in him passion and fervor for things that cause him to deviate from that path. Therefore, R. Kalonymus concludes that intellectual instruction is not enough; rather, the values of religious service must be internalized on the emotional level:

This is the main principle of Chassidic teaching: A person must not consider it sufficient that he has firmly placed his intellect into the service of God. A connection made with the intellect alone is not a lasting connection… He must link his whole soul and the life that abides in his body to divine service and devotion. He must penetrate to his soul, in order to lift it up and awaken it to feel passionately as it performs every *mitzva*, learns Torah, or prays. It should experience spiritual bliss and rejoice in this bliss.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Passion and enthusiasm lead a person to pleasure, or “bliss.” Someone who experiences genuine bliss has a taste of the World to Come while still in this world.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Thus, we see that according to R. Kalonymus, the main malaise underlying the crisis in religious education is the sense of alienation and lack of motivation concerning matters of holiness, arising from lack of emotional satisfaction[[5]](#footnote-5) – or, in short, spiritual dryness. This lack of motivation affects both the intellectual aspect of Torah study[[6]](#footnote-6) and the realm of faith and emotion in relation to maintaining a religious lifestyle.[[7]](#footnote-7)

At the same time, one should not mistakenly think that R. Kalonymus’s preoccupation with achieving enthusiasm and passion in one’s Divine service is related solely to the problem of the youthful attraction to Poland’s leisure culture. A far more profound value is involved here: The very fact that a person seeks emotion arousal and enthusiasm in his life indicates that emotions play an important role in one’s service of God. Man is not solely an intellectual being. R. Kalonymus regards it as important that a person use the full spectrum of his human powers – intellectual, physical, emotional, spiritual, and more – in serving God. Thus, the use of one’s emotional powers is an ideal in and of itself, and not only a means of addressing the problems of the times.

Moreover, R. Kalonymus seeks to improve not only the situation of the youth. He views enthusiasm and passion as powerful factors in the life of adult Chassidim as well. He mentions a different problem arising from a lack of enthusiasm towards spiritual work: Within his environment he notes elderly people who, with advanced age, lose control over their desires in certain areas. R. Kalonymus argues that these *chassidim* had, in their younger years, engaged in purely intellectual Divine service, without refining their character traits and inclinations properly.[[8]](#footnote-8) Upon reaching old age, they were now incapable of restraining certain desires, since they had never developed proper control within the emotional sphere:

My hair stands on end at the deplorable reports I have heard of aged *chassidim* who are now unable to restrain their desires even to the degree that they could in their younger years. This… is because in their youth and their younger days their [Divine] service was confined to their minds; they did not pay attention to improving themselves and their passions, activating them for that which is good and holy. They merely restrained themselves and held back their evil passions. Therefore, when they grew old and weaker – and their ability to exert themselves and restrain themselves grew weaker accordingly – they could rest only from those desires which had weakened considerably owing to the weakening of their bodies, while continuing to suffer from those that had not weakened along with themselves, finding it difficult to deal with them. For there can sometimes be a person who is especially sensitive with regard to a particular desire or want – be it to eat sweet foods or to drink, to speak badly of others, or even the awful, evil desire, God forbid, which continues to incite… while his power to exert himself and restrain himself is weakened, and then he suffers bitterly, God forbid.[[9]](#footnote-9)

This indicates that we must rethink the widely held misconception that passion and enthusiasm are the province of singular individuals alone and that a regular *chasid* can manage without them. R. Kalonymus contends that someone who suffices with purely intellectual Divine service “cannot be called a *chasid*.”[[10]](#footnote-10)

In summary, to address the abandonment of the way of Torah by the youth, it is necessary to employ means that will arouse and lead to profound religious experience that will help the person to rejoice and experience pleasure and bliss from Torah and the commandments, and to achieve closeness to God, such that he will have no need to stray into foreign pastures. In order to co-opt one’s inclinations and character traits for chasidic Divine service, one must invest – at every age and every stage of life – in emotional service, whose essence is the attainment of enthusiasm and passion, rather than sufficing with intellectual service of God.

(To be continued)

1. *A Student’s Obligation*, p. 16 (*Chovat Ha-Talmidim*, p. 21). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid. pp. 16-17 (*Chovat ha-Talmidim*, p. 21). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid. p. 17 (*Chovat ha-Talmidim*, p. 22). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Hakhsharat Ha-Avrekhim*, p. 16. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. This problem continues to plague religious society of all stripes to this day. The following words appeared in a popular Chassidic magazine in 2002: “One of the most difficult problems encountered by many people – especially youngsters just starting out on the path of [Divine] service – is a lack of enjoyment and satisfaction from Torah and Divine service. Who can claim that he never experienced a period when he felt like someone trudging through the desert, his soul dried out and stale, with no water in sight?” (Y.S. Tirnauer, “*Al Ha-Regesh*,” *Olam Ha-Chassidut* 92, 5762, pp. 53-55). The solution that the author proposes fits well with R. Kalonymus’s approach, and it is quite surprising that he neither quotes nor even mentions R. Kalonymus in his article. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Our discussion proceeds from the field of Jewish philosophy, but it should be noted that in the behavioral sciences, several studies have focused on the issue of motivation in studying. These studies try to discover what causes students to study and how they can be motivated in this direction. Some of the explanations that have been offered include the need for achievement; self-image; curiosity; responsibility; the need for connection, and more. See L. Adar, *Ha-Hana’a Le-Limudim Ve-Ishiut Ha-Talmid* (Jerusalem, 1975); A. Ziv, *Psichologia Be-Chinukh* (Tel Aviv, 1995), pp. 15-72; A. Kaplan and A. Veshor, “*Motivatzia Le-Lemida Be-Veit Ha-Sefer – Halakha U-Ma’aseh*,” *Chinukh Ha-Chashiva* 20 (2001), pp. 7-30. At the same time, we must keep in mind that these articles deal with general studies rather than Torah study, which has certain unique parameters. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See the above footnote. The question of what causes a person to take on a religious lifestyle is quite complex. In recent years, several studies have examined the causes of abandonment of religion amongst the younger generation. See M. Bar-Lev, “Culture-Specific Factors Which Cause Jews in Israel to Abandon Religious Practice,” *Religion & the Social Order* 7 (1997), pp. 185-204; S. Fisherman, *No’ar Ha-Kipot Ha-Zerukot* (Elkana, 5759); S. Fisherman, *Alma Aveda* (Elkana 5761). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. We will discuss refinement of the character and inclination in R. Kalonymus’s teachings in a later discussion. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. *Hakhsharat ha-Avrekhim*, pp. 23-24. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)